

Chairlift? I'd rather take the bus

Utah's Powder Mountain resort is vast but has just four lifts, so skiers have other ways to get uphill. **Stephen Regenold** gets a ride to the slopes

In raw acreage, there are few ski areas in North America that compare to Powder Mountain, a sprawling resort near Ogden, in northern Utah, that offers five mountains and almost 3,000 hectares (7,000 acres) of terrain. Though less well-known, it is larger than Vail or Jackson Hole. Yet Powder Mountain is old-school and underdeveloped, with only four chairlifts to serve its ample supply of alpine bowls. Harder to see are the helicopter, two caterpillar-tread snowcats and fleet of buses that help move droves of skiers and snowboarders uphill each day.

"It's kind of planes, trains and automobiles here," said Rod Kelly, a manager at Powder Mountain.

Chairlifts are the main form of uphill transport at most ski areas. Each day at Powder Mountain about 20% of the visitors elect to use one of the area's other means of getting around – be it a \$125 helicopter ride or a free bus pickup after skiing off a back bowl.

Snowcat rides, which motor 450 vertical metres up a flank called Lightning Ridge, cost \$15 a shot. Skiers pay \$56 for a lift ticket, then pick and choose additional transportation throughout the day, according to their taste for adventure and fresh snow.

"It's a unique resort experience," said Josh Stephen, who is a buyer for an outdoors shop from Vermont, and was skiing several runs in a row via snowcat on a day off before heading to Salt

Lake City for business meetings. "With the lifts, the snowcat and the buses, you

can always find untracked terrain," he added, grabbing on tight to an armrest as the snowcat rumbled uphill.

Seven skiers and three snowboarders were loaded inside our snowcat's heated cabin as its tank treads chewed through the snow. On top of the mountain, passengers clambered out, grabbing their gear. I scooped my poles off a rack,

clicked boots into bindings, and pushed off to find my skis submerged in 12cm of powder snow.

As its name implies, Powder Mountain is blessed with hundreds of centimetres of light, feathery snow each season. Knee-deep fluff that flies up on each turn is a relative luxury at most resorts, but a common commodity at Powder Mountain.

"We get spoiled here," said Jennifer

Reynolds, a lawyer from Arizona who has a holiday home in Powder. "You forget how to ski regular hard-pack snow."

On my visit, a Tuesday in mid-January, conditions were unusually warm and springlike. Powder lurked in the shade on some faces and in trees, but edge-catching crust and ice prevailed on aspects exposed to sun.

The resort had a base depth of about 1.5m – healthy enough but below average – and local skiers seemed sad. It'd been more than a week since substantial snow had fallen. On a board in one chalet one of the staff had scribbled: "Pray for Snow!"

But I had fun. Under a bright sky, with the Great Salt Lake flickering miles away in the west, it was a day for

sunglasses, not goggles, and for skiing fast on vacant, open trails.

A couple of morning runs on the snowcat led to the lifts, where I sliced large-radius turns on runs below Hidden Lake Lodge, a utilitarian chalet that sits at 2,713m. The chairlift hummed over chutes and outcrops of rock, where the phantom tracks of an extreme skier ended in thin air at the edge of a cliff. "Hope he made it," my lift mate said.

The sun was cooking the slopes, which were a white glare of high contrast and reflected beams. Lunch was cheese soup and sweet potato fries sold cafeteria-style and eaten on a tray with self-service fountain soda. After eating, I read through a waiver at the ad hoc office of Diamond Peaks Heli Ski Adventures, signing the document as I stood beside a dining table.

"Chopper's coming in two minutes," said Craig Olsen, co-owner of the operation, which sells one-off heli-ski rides and all-day adventures, mostly from Powder Mountain.

A thump-thump rhythm beat in the distance before propeller blades screamed in, slicing the air. The skiers ran over, heads down, and clambered in, the pilot giving a thumbs-up before throttling from the snow. We flew just a few miles, banking over Powder Mountain's parking lot and ascending to an adjacent peak. The chopper twisted and set down on the snow. Doors opened; skiers piled out.

"Always wanted to try this," shouted Chris Sexton, a builder from Massachusetts. Smiling, he watched the helicopter



swoop away, then turned his gaze to the slopes. "Which way down?"

The peak dropped to rocks and wide bowls, stunted trees poking from a white face. At 2,872m, James Peak is Powder Mountain's highest point, and its least-accessible area. Fresh powder on its flanks is almost guaranteed.

Snow sloughed in a lazy wave as I leaned into my first turn. The steep bowl, a bare line called Carpe Diem, dropped 300m on loose snow that was halfway between powder and corn. The run wove through rocks for two dozen big turns, dropping below a ridge, into the trees, then funnelling to a trail.

I stopped to watch Sexton and four other skiers coasting out on a traverse. They lined up, then pushed away to turn, small dots squiggling on a far face.

The run dropped back towards the main area, intersecting with a beginner's trail, then cruising through a drainage to 2,103m. It was 2pm, and the hills were turning to slush. A bare-headed snowboarder stripped to his T-shirt skidded past, his long hair conjuring an April day.

I took two more chairlift runs, my skis spraying slush on each turn. Then I headed out for one final trip into Powder's off-piste section. A large part of Powder Mountain – about 480 hectares of terrain – is designated "Powder Country," a backcountry-like area that has no lifts. Skiers access Powder Country from the lift-served area, but the runs drop about 600 vertical metres away from the lodge and on to a road.

The resort runs vans and buses along this road, picking skiers up at no cost and shuttling them back to the lifts.

A single run might yield 100 turns in thigh-deep snow, white mist exploding as you drop away in the woods. I found some remnant loose snow on my last run of the day, and cut lazy turns toward the road. A gully ended abruptly at the tarmac, where a van was waiting, with its radio tuned to classic rock, and cranked up.

"Welcome down," the driver said, his indicator click-clicking, ready to leave. We chugged up the road, skis bouncing in a rack on the outside of the van. Powder Mountain sprawled above, with its endless ways to go downhill – and quite

a few to get back up again.

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ESSENTIALS

Powder Mountain is about an hour's drive north of Salt Lake City airport. Bmi (0844 848 4888; flybmi.com) flies to Salt Lake City, via Chicago, from London Heathrow from £536. For accommodation visit powdermountain.com. Ski World (08444 930430; skiworld.ltd.uk) offers a seven-night package to Powder Mountain from £1,089, including flights, B&B accommodation, car hire and lift pass.





Powder Mountain has a fleet of buses to carry skiers back up the mountain, as well as snowcats and a helicopter.

Photograph by Denny Montgomery